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ABSTRACT

The idea that school-family partnerships educate the modern child more completely than the individual efforts of either institution is so compelling today that it has become a national cry. This study investigated an attempt to create a Parent Attitude Change Toward School (PACTS) by including parents in a regular classroom lesson with their child once a month. The project operated in 5 different schools and involved 11 inservice and 42 preservice teachers. PACTS encouraged teachers to use the Learning Cycle lesson plan concept, but gave teachers considerable freedom to develop the essential parental component in their classrooms. The project also provided a network of support from cohorts and professors and empowered pre-service teachers through a mentor-mentee relationship. Student attendance records were kept to quantify any changes that could reflect a parent attitude change toward school. Attendance records of parents who participated in the parent-involvement lessons were kept, and observation and interviews were also conducted. Results indicated increasing student and parent attendance and increasingly positive attitudes on the part of parents, student, and teachers. (Contains 31 references.) (EV)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN TYPICAL CLASSROOM LESSONS: CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

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Parent Involvement in Typical Classroom Lessons:

Changing Attitudes Toward School

The idea that school/family partnerships educate the modern child more completely than the individual efforts of either institution is so compelling today that it has become a national cry. The concept, however, is neither new nor startling; throughout time each institution has called on the other for help to provide children with skills for productive citizenship. For example, parents of the colonial era understood that times were changing and their children needed to be able to read in English. They banded together and took a substantial step forward in the development of primary schools (Spring, 1994). The preamble to the Puritan School Law of 1647 states that every township will appoint a schoolmaster to teach all children to write and read (Benton, 1968).

School/family partnerships not only help parents prepare their children for life, but also improve society as well. As American colonies matured into a nation after the Revolutionary War, citizenry recognized that an education provided children more than the basic skills; it was the tool for independence. Parents and schools collaborated to create a cultural identity and established secular schools which included the freedom to think; patriotism increased (Johansen, Johnson, & Henniger, 1993). The concept of universal education began to take hold, and children of varied backgrounds were admitted into public schools. Simultaneously, enhanced expectations for early childhood education made it possible for educators to dream of schools as institutions for creating the perfect society (Spring, 1994).

Those dreams instigated a common acceptance of school as the most able partner to prepare students for life (Spring, 1994). The vision of the school as the citadel of education soon escalated to the university. Early in the 20th Century, graduate schools of education evolved to manage society's education; those who studied there were regarded as most worthy to proclaim the path of knowledge (Spring, 1994). Gradually, parents, always the child's first teacher, began to relinquish that responsibility to the school. Today, with home life more complex than ever before, and faced with pressure on family structure, parents target the school as the most valuable resource in their child's education (Lay-Doper, 1994). While schools and institutions of higher learning are most certainly a valuable resource, the viewpoint that they are a panacea for personal and social problems is no longer valid. Neither is university research the magic word. In fact, because university research is institutionally driven, it is sometimes viewed as ineffective in the classroom (Spring, 1994). Schnook (1987) refers to this as the gap between the high hill of academia and the slimy swamp of reality. Rapid societal development has precluded the possibility that professional educators alone can prepare students for success in our increasingly sophisticated world (Johnson, et al., 1993).

Undeniably, the collaborative work of university, school, and family serve society best. Current studies strongly suggest that the most accurate predictor of student success is the extent to which families become engaged in the educational process (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Although the structure of the American family has changed in the last few decades, its members still value one another, and its children still need parental support (Elkind, 1995). From family, children find the love and support necessary to sustain them through disappointments, and the encouragement they need to press forward (Hunter, 1994; White-Hood, 1994). Bronfennbrenner (1984) refers to the child and family as an ecological package. When family goals dovetail with the school agenda students are more successful (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Over the past decade, there has been a deluge of programs and activities organized by school and community (Henderson & Berla, 1994). For the first time in history, March 31, 1994, the federal government wrote the concept into law. Goals 2000: Educate America Act directs every school to promote partnerships with parents (Department of Education, 1994). In schools across the nation there is a new excitement in creating ties that bind (Daniels, 1996). Studies suggest that parents and teachers who support one another produce students who are: 1) high achievers, 2) more likely to attend school faithfully, 3) less likely to be in special education classes, and 4) more inclined to enroll in postsecondary education (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Parents involved in partnerships develop more confidence in their schools, their children, and themselves, and their regard for teachers increases. Schools and society also benefit; teacher morale and motivation increases, and, as a consequence, so does community spirit (Daniels, 1996).

Promoting involvement as a key component of student success includes not only inviting parents to be spectors, volunteers, or teachers-at-home, but also involving them in decision-making (Brandt, 1996; Gough, 1995). Despite all these forces at work, there is still general indication that teachers use infrequent parent involvement strategies, with the exceptions of reporting classroom procedures, grades, or behaviors (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Roeser, 1995). Evidence suggests that teachers may be fearful that parents will scoff at innovative teaching strategies, criticize their teaching style, or challenge the curriculum they teach (Daniels, 1996; Roeser, 1995; Scherer, 1996). In spite of the truth that may accompany those fears, there is far more consensus than disagreement about the advantages of parental involvement in the educational process (Dauber, & Epstein, 1993; Green & Sancho, 1990).

The idea that collaborative efforts between school and family are more effective than individual efforts is as old as the public school. Throughout time each institution relied on the other. Vitality within any organization is more likely when opportunity exists to experiment with fresh possibilities offered by different viewpoints. With an ageless regard

for education and a clear understanding of the need for useful research, contemporary reformers no longer rely on research that is generated at the university level and trickles down into the classroom (Anson & Fox, 1995). Instead, they believe that genuine education reform involves vision, conversation, and interaction between school and community (Eisner, 1995).

Professional Development Through Networks

Research in preservice and inservice teacher education suggests that meaningful professional development engages teachers in their own learning and provides opportunity for personal growth (Cook, 1982; Schmoker, 1996). Teacher autonomy is strengthened through nteworking (Floden, et al., 1995; Goodlad, 1990; Knowles, 1984).). If educational reform means that teachers are to participate in reliable research to reach new goals, then reform efforts must address teacher networking in conjunction with teacher autonomy (Glickman, 1992).

Armed with such knowledge, a professor from the university engaged preservice teachers in a faculty-student action research project with teachers in a city school to change parent and pre- and in-service teacher attitudes about working together. Research suggests that partnerships among parents, students and teachers are more important to student success than any other family statistic (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hanushek, 1994).

Methods

Spring semester, 1995,the university-inservice teacher-preservice teacher team initiated a research project to create a Parent Attitude Change Toward School (PACTS) by including parents in a regular classroom lesson with their child once a month. Often parents come to school to watch a program, tutor, or volunteer. They do not come into the classroom and get involved with the most important aspect of school--the child's learning. Many times they do not come into the classroom because they are not invited to participate in classroom lessons. Teachers may be intimidated by parents, fearing criticism. The

project goal is broader than changing parent attitudes toward school, it also intends to change in-service and pre-service attitudes. The project operates in five different schools and involves 11 inservice and 42 preservice teachers.

PACTS teachers are encouraged to consider the Learning Cycle lesson plan concept (Karplus, 1977; Sunal & Haas, 1993). Like other formats, it intends to focus attention, teach, and assess learning. Different, however, it emphasizes exploration of students' prior knowledge, in order to link what they already know to what will be taught. In the second, or invention phase, students are guided to restructure existing ideas into more complete concepts or generalizations. As its name implies, the invention phase involves learners in discovering knowledge, for research demonstrates that which is "invented" is more meaningful than material "presented" (Iran-Nejad, 1993). During the invention phase teachers assess student learning to validate mastery. The expansion phase provides an often overlooked opportunity to use the new knowledge or skill in different context. This last part of the Learning Cycle is important because it moves beyond the traditional goal of mastery to application in life situations. PACTS teachers are encouraged to support an integrated curriculum, a whole theme approach to teaching. PACTS gives teachers considerable freedom to develop the essential parental component in their classrooms, provides a network of support from cohorts and professors, and empowers preservice teachers through mentor-mentee relationships. It encourages examination of new theory in terms of teacher/student/family interaction.

Data Collection

Student attendance records were kept to quantify any changes in student attendance that could reflect a parent attitude change toward school. Attendance records of parents who participated in the parent-involvement lessons were also also kept. As the pre- and in-service teachers and the university coordinator participated in the treatment they interacted with the parents and recorded observations and comments made during and after the classroom lessons. Some interviews were conducted with hand-held recorders. Qalitative

data pretaining to pre- and in-service teacher attitude changes were collected from their journals. Transcripts were also typed from the monthly informal seminars of the inservice and preservice teachers.

Results

Results reflect data collected from January, 1995 through May, 1995. A t-test comparing the total absences between the first semester and the second semester demonstrated statistical significance, $t(86)=3.93$, $p=.0002$. Mean absences of first semester was 7.264 and mean absences for treatment semester was 4.676. These data result in an effect size, expressed as a product moment correlation coefficient (Rosenthal 1991), of .39. Qualitative data confirm the significance of the t-test. Teachers reported that first semester absences frequently occurred without explanation, but during second semester parents more often wrote an explanatory note.

The numbers of parents who attended the sessions were also recorded. While no t-test was administered on those numbers, there was a demonstrated parent attendance increase in each classroom. It seems appropriate to interpret increased parent attendance during January, February, and March as an indication of appreciation for learning in the classroom. The climate of the Northeast is severe during the winter months and can impose hardship on getting to school to visit, especially when there are younger children who often have to accompany the parent.

Qualitative data in the form of transcribed audio tapes and journal entries were categorized. Examples of findings underscore a gradual change in parent attitude change toward school. One mother was a reticent participant in January, became more engaged with her daughter in the second lesson. After the third lesson she praised the teacher for the "way" she taught. She was happy to see an emphasis on experience rather than workbooks. It was a startlingly different climate from the one she remembered at that very same school eighteen years earlier. So impressed, she shared her experiences with the child's father, who resides in another state. When Dad came back for a visit, he called the

teacher to explain that he would not be around for the scheduled lessons, but would like to see what was happening in that classroom. Of course he was invited; he stayed the entire morning!

Before PACTS began, one father repeatedly took his kindergarten son out of school for long week-ends. One stormy day in April that father called to tell the teacher his son was crying, afraid of the weather, and did not want to come to school. The father went on to explain that after attending the PACTS lessons, he understood the importance of being in school every single day. He would bring his son, albeit, they would be late. Some thirty minutes later, the boy arrived--sitting upon Dad's shoulders. The father had told his son, "I need you to sit on my shoulders and hold on to me, so I'll be able to carry you to school." After the father swung the boy to the floor, he grinned at him and said, "Together we did it!" On that stormy day Father had convinced Son that a dad needs a child's support if he is to carry him in the rain--just as a son needs a father's support to get to school.

In addition to changing parent attitude change toward school, qualitative data indicated a student attitude change as well. As parent comments were categorized, one emerged to reflect a change in students' attitude toward school. Examples of students more willing to do their homework are: "He's thrilled because we come to school just to learn with him. Now homework is like a family affair," and "Finding out what the homework was used to be like pulling teeth. Not now!" Examples of students' escalated interest in learning are, "She is so much more interested since I've been coming. She has always talked to me about school friends and the teacher, but now she tells me what she learns and how to think about it," and "We are all looking forward to the report card this semester." An example of students who felt the positive spreading beyond the schoolhouse door is, "My son feels good about school now because all of us parents are getting to know each other. So now we have become closer at Little League and all the kids seem to be proud."

Teachers' attitudes were positively affected, "I could never have imagined the excitement or the joy that my second graders and I would experience spring semester, 1995;" and, "The research aspect of this project also appealed to us teachers. . . our enthusiasm was nurtured . . . we passed that same feeling along to our students and their parents." Preservice teachers were grateful for the opportunity to see PACTS in action. How to collaborate with parents is not a traditional part of the elementary education curriculum (Henderson and Berla 1994). One education major put it this way, "From time to time we've talked about parent involvement in class, but I had no idea how dramatically it impacted everybody. This experience has been worth a thousand lectures."

In the process of positively changing the attitudes of parents, students, and teachers, positive attitude changes apparently reverberated throughout at least one school community. The kindergarten teacher reported that the P.T.A. was supportive of PACTS to the point that they sponsored a field trip in April to the city museum for every child and parent or surrogate. Sixteen of the 19 parents spent an afternoon with their child in the museum.

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